

Re-introduction of the Red-necked Ostrich, *Struthio camelus camelus*, in Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area in central Saudi Arabia

by M. Zafar-ul Islam, Khairi Ismail and Ahmed Boug

Abstract. As the Arabian Ostrich *Struthio camelus syriacus*, a distinct subspecies, became extinct in the wild during the mid-20th century, the most closely related subspecies, *S. c. camelus* occurring in north-eastern Africa, has been chosen for reintroduction into Saudi Arabia. A few individuals of this Red-necked Ostrich were obtained from Sudan in 1988-89 from a private collection, and in 1994 a few birds were translocated to Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area into a 25 ha fenced enclosure. So far a total of 96 Red-necked Ostriches has been released into the fenced Mahazat as-Sayd and the estimated population is between 125 and 150 individuals. Since captive flocks of Ostriches were translocated to Mahazat, their survival rate increased by >41% up to the end of 2000. On an average 22-30 chicks are hatched annually. A total of 137 Ostriches was recorded dead over the period of 13 years during the drought period. Both captive-bred and wild-born adults and young died of starvation and thirst, despite being provisioned with alfalfa and water during several years.

Key words. Red-necked Ostrich, reintroduction, Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area, Saudi Arabia, drought, Middle East.

Introduction

The Arabian Ostrich, *Struthio camelus syriacus*, has been completely lost from the Arabian avifauna. It had remained in balance with its human predators probably for thousands of years as it could compete on equal terms against hunters armed only with lances and mounted on horses. In Arabia, it became extinct in the late 1930s, after only a short period when its hunters gained the advantage through modern firearms and motorised vehicles (JENNINGS 1986). The sad story of the fate of the Ostrich in Arabia is a sobering pointer to the destructive potential of man, especially when he is enthused by the chance of a reward or by the excitement of the chase.

The species was historically distributed across Africa, Arabia, and parts the Middle East (CRAMP & SIMMONS 1977). The form that occurred in Arabia was generally accepted as a distinct subspecies (*S. c. syriacus* Rothschild, 1919; also see BROWN et al. 1983) and was known as the Arabian Ostrich (JENNINGS 1986). It became extinct in the wild due to over-hunting and commercial exploitation (JENNINGS 1986). Arabian Ostriches became extinct in captivity at about the same time.

Ostriches were often captured whilst young and raised in captivity. There are records of imported captive birds at Taif as early as 1917 and an escaped chick was caught near Jeddah in 1978. Since the 1970s, Ostrich farms and private collections containing Ostriches of various subspecies have been reported from all corners of Arabia, and escapes have occurred.